

Spring Break at the Stiles's

by Musical Redhead

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Spring Break at the Stiles's

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****Spring Break** **at the Stiles's****

Jennifer Stiles stood at the counter in the downstairs kitchen cutting a block of cheese and arranging the slices on a wooden platter. The basement was one big L-shaped room, with a kitchen enclosed by a bar, that opened to an adjoining den in the corner. Her son was lying on the big leather couch, reading a biography by Ron Chernow. The kids had the week off, so Jenny and Jason both took some days off work too.

She pulled out a box of Wheat Thins from a pantry stocked mainly with snack food and added a pile to the tray she was preparing. She was eating a few straight from the box when they could hear feet descending the stairs. Jason followed Sloan and they took seats at the bar.

"Come over for a snack," Jenny told Xavier.

He dropped the large tome on the floor and joined his family at the counter. "Can I go to New York with you tomorrow?" he asked his mother.

"To do what?" she asked. "You can't come to the office with me. I already took two days off and my boss hates me."

Jason paused before eating a couple crackers. "Your boss is your

uncle, he can't hate you."

"There's not a rule against it," she said. "He definitely doesn't trust me."

"I don't want to go to work with you," Xavier said. "I want to ride the subway."

Simultaneously, Jason and Jennifer sighed and rolled their eyes. Their son had educated them all on New York's underground transit system-it's history, the lines and services, where one could find stations. For someone who didn't live in the city or ride the rails regularly, he had extensive knowledge of the subway schedule.

"You guys did that already," Jenny said. She nodded at Jason. "Remember, Dad took an extra long shower that night."

"You would too if you rode the subway for over five hours. It was just one train after another," Jason said. "The express lines aren't so bad. But the ones that make all the local stops?" He just shook his head.

"I want to go by myself this time," Xavier said.

"Me too, I want to come with you," Sloan said eagerly. "Please, please, please," she begged him, eyes wide. She pressed her hands together as though in prayer.

"No one said he gets to go," Jenny told her.

"Please Mommy, let us go. QamuhSha'. You too, Daddy."

"What does qamuhSha' mean?" Jennifer asked. "It sounds suspiciously like Klingon."

Sloan grinned proudly and nodded. "It means I love you."

"Aw, that's cute," Jenny said. "How do you say thank you?"

"Qalho'."

Xavier said, "That's the word, but Klingons don't say thank you."

Jenny looked from one of her children to the other. Then to her husband, witheringly.

"What?" Jason said, stacking cheese and sausage on top of a cracker. "No one ever said Klingons were well-bred."

Jennifer turned back to Sloan. "If you're trying to butter us up, we'll accept one hundred dollar bills and _Hamilton _tickets."

Sloan stared for a moment, then brightened. "Ooh, okay," she said, quickly climbing down from her chair and running up the stairs. The rest of them frowned in her wake.

Jason said, "I'm confident she doesn't have either."

"If she does, I hope it's the tickets," Jenny said.

"So I'll go with you tomorrow morning, and I'll meet you when you get off work," Xavier said, his plan clear in his mind.

"You know, there's a whole city with stuff to do above ground," Jason pointed out.

Xavier shrugged. He could care less.

Sloan came back down the stairs a couple minutes later, climbing back up on her chair and sliding a ten dollar bill across the countertop. "There you go." She tapped the face of the founding father in the center of the bill.

Jenny smirked. "Hamilton, ah, I see what you did there. Clever."

"I don't have any one hundred dollar bills yet. Daddy showed me one of his. Benjamin Franklin is on it, even though he wasn't a president."

"Neither was Hamilton," Xavier said. Then he bobbed his head as he chanted, "_Well he's never going to be president now. That's one less thing to worry about_, _one less thing to worry about_."

Sloan bragged, "Mommy let me listen to the songs with bad words in the car yesterday."

"Which bad words?" Xavier asked.

She bit down on her smile and shook her head. Thinking she was being subtle, she pointed to their parents.

"Okay, you can tell me later," he said casually.

Jennifer asked, "You had ten dollars lying around in your room?"

"She has \$73.86 in a pencil box hidden in the back of her closet," Xavier said. "She takes it out every couple of weeks and makes me help her count it all."

Scandalized, Sloan's jaw dropped and she gasped. She put a finger to her lips. "Shhhh. Don't tell everybody!" She pouted, "I have to move it now."

"No one is going to take your money," Jason said. "Sit down on your chair before you fall." When she'd done as she was told he asked, "Where did you get all that money?"

"From some people," she said. "Like Grandpa. And like when you give us some money for snacks when we go to the movies."

"You don't want any snacks?"

She shook her head, lacing her fingers together on the counter and leaning over her arms. "No, I want to keep the money."

"You should have given it back to Dad if you didn't spend it," Xavier said.

"You didn't give yours back," she argued.

"Because I got popcorn and soda. That's what it was for." Then he frowned and said, "Sometimes you do get a drink."

She shook her head at him, her eyes wide with defiance. "I get water, so I don't have to pay for it."

Jenny hid a wide smile behind her hand, laughing lightly. "You are so stingy."

Jason shook his head at his wife. "She has more coming in than going out. That's smart, that's the goal."

"But it was from Dad and you didn't use it," Xavier tried again. "So you should give it back."

"You're never going to make it in the insurance business with a philosophy like that," Jennifer said.

Xavier frowned at her. "I don't care."

"Oh that's right, we're not working on you." She looked back to Sloan with a smirky smile.

Feeling the eyes on her, Sloan defensively said, "Daddy gave it to me in case I wanted something. I just didn't want anything." She gave Jason a furtive side glance as she sheepishly ate a piece of cheese followed by a cracker.

"It's fine, you can keep the money."

Sloan gave her brother a pointed 'ha' look. "I'm going to use it to ride the subway."

"You're not coming with me."

"Yes I am."

"We never said anyone was going," Jason reminded them. He tilted his head toward the steps. "Why don't you go upstairs so your mom and I can discuss it?"

Xavier brightened and hopped down and headed for the stairs. Sloan had clambered down from her stool too and was at his heels. "They're deciding if _I _get to go," he told her.

"And me too!"

"No!"

"Yes, I'm coming!"

"Nuh-uh," Xavier said, muffled now that they were at the top of the stairs.

Once they were gone, it was finally quiet. Jenny sliced a few more pieces of cheese and they continued to snack in peace. She moved the knife and cutting board to the sink and put away the crackers when

they were finished. "Well?"

"Well what?" Jason asked, accepting a glass of ice water.

She took a sip of her own. "Do you want to let them ride the subway tomorrow?"

"Oh, we're really discussing it? I thought we landed on no," he said. "I was just getting rid of them. The boy keeps picking petty fights with the girl, who hasn't figured out he's just messing with her. They're driving me crazy."

"And you _don't _want them to ride the subway on their own?"

"In New York, by themselves? You do?"

Jenny picked up a washcloth from the sink and wiped off the counter. "Kids ride the subway all the time. It's safe, and easy entertainment. I know you don't like it. You're a transportation snob."

Jason held his palms up and shook his head in protest. "I am not a transportation snob."

"So you like the subway?"

He stared at her for a moment. "It's . . . fine."

She smirked. "Mm-hmm. Are you sad Xavier wants to go without you?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sad, he's almost 15. He'll probably be fine. But now Sloan wants to go with him. You've seen the rats. New York rats are as big as her." He pointed his thumb at the stairs where the girl had disappeared.

She grinned at this concern. "I'm sure Xavier will wrestle off any ROUS's that attack."

Jason gave her a strange look. "What?"

"Like Westley. In the Fire Swamp. Rodents of Unusual Sizes?" His brow creased further. She blinked. "Nevermind, not important."

Jason went on, "They could fall down onto the tracks or get separated when the doors close."

"There's a human conductor to watch for people getting on before the train leaves the station," she said. "Is that all you think about-risk assessment?"

"Well, yeah, that's pretty much what I do. And we're not talking about possible property damage-that, you can throw some money at to fix or replace. We're talking about our kids here. We can't replace them."

Jennifer inhaled sharply and put a hand over her heart. "That might be the sweetest thing you've ever said." She dropped her hand. "Xavier will get his learner's permit soon. In your professional opinion, which is more dangerous-automobiles or the subway?"

He had to concede, "Automobiles."

"And yet, can the boy expect a nice shiny death trap next year?"

Jason tapped a finger on the counter, stalling. "Yes." He sighed, losing the argument.

Jenny nodded over to the pool table on the other side of the couch. "Rack 'em up. I win, they get to go. You win, they stay locked in the house all day. With you."

He got up and went over to the plastic triangle hanging on the wall and sat it on the table, placing the pool balls in it. "When you put it like that the prospect does not sound appealing."

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Xavier happily watched the commuters quickly making their way through the entrance of the subway station. There was a constant flow of people coming down the stairs, passing the people who were at their destination and walking up to the street. He smiled to himself at the sound of a subway train the level under them swooshing in and coming to a stop, the brakes squealing.

He'd snuck back downstairs the previous day under the premise of retrieving his book. Jason was concentrating on lining up his ball, and knew why his son was really there. "We're still deciding." He took his shot and the three of them watched the balls roll around.

Noting the solids and stripes left on the table, and that his mother was winning, Xavier asked, "Who's on my side? I hope it's Mom."

Jason's eyes shifted to him. "Go back upstairs."

Xavier had been bummed at first, when they said he could go under the contingency that he take his little sister along. He protested at first. "Xavier, do not throw away your shot," his mother had told him pointedly, to which he could not argue. Given the option to go with Sloan or stay at home, he took the deal.

He nodded his head and quietly chanted, "_I am not throwing away my shot, I am not throwing away my shot_."

"Okay, here," Jason said, handing Xavier a thin yellow metro card with blue font to be used for the day. He handed one to Sloan too, firmly adding, "Don't lose this."

Jenny leaned down to look over the girl's shoulder. "Keep it in your pocket so you can pull it out easy." She pointed to the commuters. "See all those people? They're going really fast because they're in a hurry to get somewhere, like work. You have to walk fast to keep up, so you don't get in their way, okay?"

Sloan nodded silently.

"And if you ride an escalator, stand on the right side so people who

want to walk can get by on the left side."

The train that they could see from their vantage point closed its doors and started to depart. Sloan's eyes widened and she looked up at her brother urgently. "We're missing it."

"It's okay," he said reassuringly. "We'll get on the next one. It'll be here in six minutes."

"Do you have your phone?" Jason asked his son.

Xavier nodded and took it out of his pocket. "Yeah. But I'm going to give it to Sloan," he said, handing it to the girl.

"Why?"

"Because I know how to find my way around, and she'll be able to call you if she gets lost."

Jason took the phone out of Sloan's hand and gave it back to Xavier, exasperated at the idea. "She isn't going to get lost because you aren't going to let go of her hand." He glanced down at his daughter and back to Xavier. "If you lose her, you're going to military school, and I mean it this time."

"I won't."

He pulled a twenty dollar bill out of his wallet, and did not miss Sloan's interest. He gave the money to the boy. "For lunch. You better take it or you'll go hungry."

"Make sure you're back here by six so we can go to dinner," Jennifer said.

"Okay."

"Don't stand too close to the edge of the platform," Jason said. "And hold on tight if you have to stand."

Jenny gave Sloan a hug and told her to have fun. "All right, go on, before you miss your train."

"Come on, Sloanie, let's get on the B," Xavier said, holding out his hand for his sister. She took it and kept up with him gamely. He pointed to a sign. "Uptown and the Bronx, that means north."

"North," she repeated dutifully, even though she was directionally challenged.

He showed her how to slide her card first at the entrance and did the same with his own. He took her hand again when they were both through. His Seattle Seahawks hat and her bouncing blond ponytail was the last their parents saw of them as they disappeared down the stairs.

Solemnly, Jenny said, "He's leaving a boy, and will return a man." Then she sang, "_In New York you can be a new man_."

"Shoot, I forgot to tell him to stay in Manhattan."

She patted Jason's arm. "He probably wouldn't have anyway. They'll be fine, and if not, they'll call and you can ride in and be the hero."

"Yeah I guess." He seemed to focus on his wife for the first time that morning. "Are you and Sloan dressed alike?"

"We are," Jenny said, straightening her jacket. "She had her jean jacket on and said, 'Mommy, you should put yours on so we can match.' I have to milk that while she still thinks it's fun."

He grinned. "That's adorable."

"Walk me to work?" She took his arm and they walked back up the stairs, where the sun was shining and the sky was blue. It was the perfect New York morning. "Your military school threat sounded way less empty this time," she commented as they approached an intersection with the Don't Walk signal lit. They glanced both ways and crossed anyway, along with the other pedestrians.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I think we all almost believed you this time."

"I could do it," Jason said. "Just pack up his trunk and ship him off. Tristan has already said he's sending his kids."

"That's because his kids are four and five. That's way too close together." She smiled. "You would miss Xavier too much. He'll be off to college in a few years, anyway. And who knows if he'll stick around after that."

"What are you talking about? Where will he go?"

"Have you ever heard him say he wants to go back to Seattle?"

He looked at her with a frown. "No. He wants to go back to Seattle? Why?"

Jennifer lifted her shoulders. "He thinks he likes it better there." They briskly crossed the street while the countdown informed them they had five seconds to do so.

"Is this about his Seahawks? We can watch them on TV from here."

"I don't know," Jennifer said. "I guess he just doesn't feel like he belongs here. You know?"

Relenting slightly, Jason said, "That's how I feel every time I walk onto Yale's campus." Then he lifted a brow. "I never thought I'd say this, but maybe he'll decide he wants to go there."

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "Or, hey, maybe he'll meet a nice northeastern girl in college and decide he'd rather stay." She added, "The Klingon probably won't help though."

Jason shook his head. "It won't. But that's pretty young to settle down anyway. He should go out and do his own thing for a while."

Consolingly, she said, "We still have Sloanie." They turned a corner to go the last block. "It was nice of you to let them go today, even though I let you win. They're going to have fun."

"Jennifer Dugray, you say that every time I beat you at something. I won that game."

She grinned. "This is me," she said, nodding to the back entrance of her office building. "What are you going to do today?"

"I'm going to meet a client. And then I guess I should visit the Richard Rodgers Theater."

She gasped, hopeful. "For?"

"To see if I can finagle _Hamilton _tickets for some time this year."

Jenny's eye's grew larger and a smile stretched her lips. She silently clapped her hands. "Yay. You _will _be the hero of the day."

"Even if I have to lease the kids and mortgage the house?"

She blinked. "That guilt will go away. Obviously, the house goes first, if it comes to that." Still smiling at him, she said, "QamuhSha', qamuhSha'."

"Mmm, I like it when you speak Klingon."

Leaning in toward him, she said one more time, "QamuhSha'." She gave him a kiss. "Have a good day."

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file.